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ABSTRACT

A compilation of lectures and presentations from Nordic and international conferences, symposia, and seminars, as well as informal contributions to debates, this booklet was published originally as a 1987 greeting by the Danish National Association of Reading Teachers. Topics covered in an often humorous presentation include reading, reading comprehension, comparative reading, reading research, translation and its difficulties, and the special problems (such as scepticism), Danish children cause by reading as much as they do, and becoming therefore, increasingly knowledgeable and independent! Two appendixes list literature mentioned in the booklet, and literature about Danish schools and reading instruction. (SR)

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A Little About Language, Words and Concepts

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A Little About Language, Words and Concepts

Mogens Jansen

A little about language, words, and concepts

– or what may happen when children learn to read

CS 094435

Landsforeningen af Læsepædagoger

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A Little About Language.
Words and Concepts
© 1987 by Mogens Jansen
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with Lotte Rosbak Juhl
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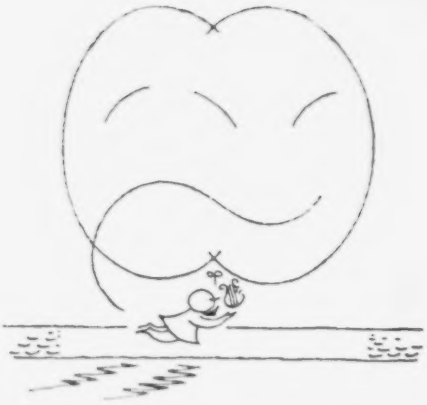
Why this booklet?

Many serious and informative articles, books, reports, etc. have been written about reading, reading comprehension, conceptual development, cognitive style, etc. Most of them are engaged texts. Very often they are objective. Once in a while the writer takes not only his subject but also himself seriously – almost solemnly.

The following is a compilation of past years' lectures and presentations, etc. from Northern and international congresses, symposia, and seminars – as well as informal contributions to debates which could hardly be called serious. Originally, all the contributions were, to some degree, about reading, reading comprehension, comparative reading, etc.

It is only right that this compilation is introduced by Piet Hein's grook, The Eternal Twins:



THE ETERNAL TWINS

Taking fun
as simply fun
and earnestness
in earnest
shows how thoroughly
thou none
of the two
discernest.

Translating is impossible – it is also necessary

This is a story about why it is impossible to translate children's books into – and from – Danish, and probably also between all other languages.

The fact that nevertheless we do translate indicates the same unfailing optimism as displayed by the three-year-old girl when – playing on the beach – she begins to scoop out the North Sea into a green plastic bucket by means of a strainer.

In every translation the words are the real problem. It can be solved – more or less. However, the language represents far worse problems than one would think when considering the words. And the concepts behind the language render these necessary translations quite impossible.

Any translator (without regard to the language area), any researcher (without regard to the subject area), and any editor who has ventured beyond the domestic spheres is aware of all this.

In the children's literature these problems really unfold. Here they are not only found as in so many other places. Here they have grown big.

A little of what is not – cannot be – translated

When Alexandre Dumas lets d'Artagnan be a man from Gascogne, this is an extra refinement – in order to underline that he is a country boy coming to the big city! If Dumas had been a German, he would most likely have had d'Artagnan come from Schwaben. Had he been Danish, d'Artagnan would have come from Mols, if it had been in the old days (today he would have come from Aarhus) – and had Dumas been a Swede, d'Artagnan would have been a Norwegian! Recently the Norwegians have revenged themselves by telling stories about Swedes; however, that matter belongs to the present.

That this detail – d'Artagnan coming from Mols – is not included in the Danish

While the French d'Artagnan is defending Madame Bonacieux's honour, the Danish d'Artagnan is killing a pocket watch he has just found.

translation of "The Three Musketeers" is obvious. And how could – in an English version – d'Artagnan possibly have been a Paddy from Tipperary, when the novel takes place in France?

In other words, in any translation many chips are bound to fly off from a good work. This is true, even if the translator takes great pains and is ever so loyal. In fact, it is a question *how* loyal to the text the translator can be, if the meaning is to be reproduced.

And when nevertheless something must be translated!

Naturally, these problems of translation are not limited to the translation from one language into another. They are general also within what we optimistically call "one and the same language". The classical example of a good mixture of sociolect and professional language causing problems is Mark Twain's story "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral" which is surpassed only by experiences from the language research of the everyday life – which are seldom quite so funny and never so well-written.

However, good examples from the daily life can be found:

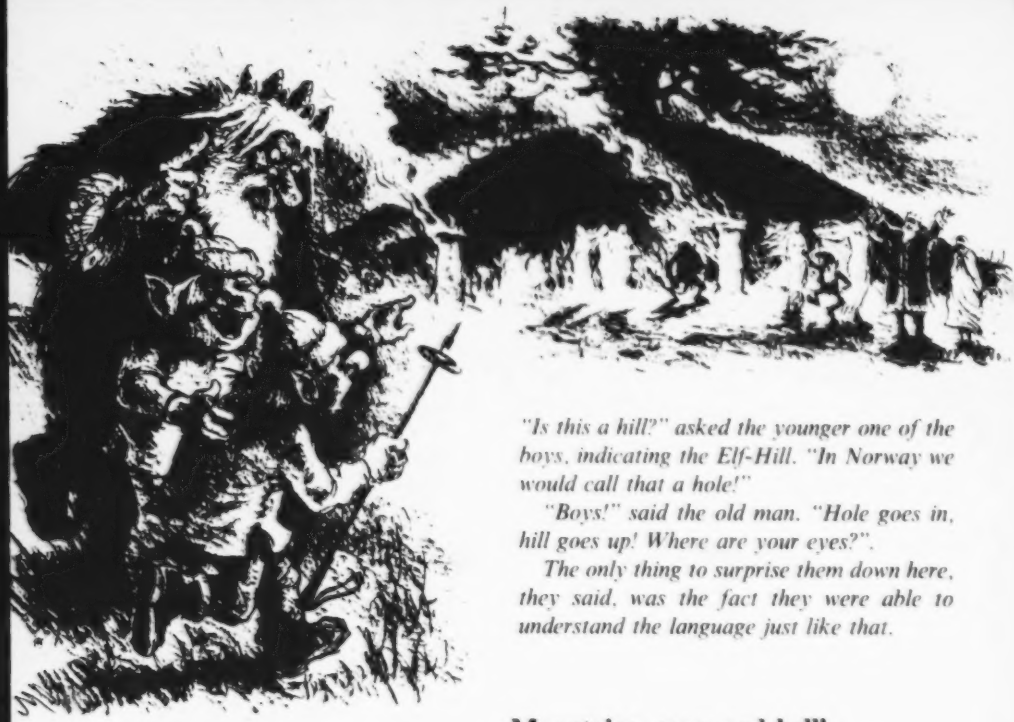
J. M. Foers, one of the fathers of the two English notices of assessment which apply to different sections of the population, knows many stories about clashes between sociolect and professional language (Foers, 1985). And Henning Skaarup, the leader of the Danish State Information Service, tells this story in an effort to make public officers, etc. write a language which people will understand:

The story is about a plumber who wrote his trade union that he had discovered that hydrochloric acid was the best he knew when it came to cleaning out sewer tubes.

The trade council of the union replied: "While the efficiency of hydrochloric acid is indisputable, the corrosive distilling residuum is incompatible with metallic constancy."

The plumber wrote back that he was pleased to see that the trade council agreed with him.

The council replied: "A possible responsibility for the generation of toxic and noxi-



"Is this a hill?" asked the younger one of the boys, indicating the Elf-Hill. "In Norway we would call that a hole!"

"Boys!" said the old man. "Hole goes in, hill goes up! Where are your eyes?".

The only thing to surprise them down here, they said, was the fact they were able to understand the language just like that.

ous residua in connection with the use of hydrochloric acid cannot be taken from this end, and we suggest that you use an alternative procedure."

The word "use" was largely the only part the plumber understood from that letter; he wrote back that he was glad to see that the council was willing to go in for the suggested procedure.

The official of the trade council dispaired. However, by good fortune, the wash basin of the council was choked, and a plumber was just fixing it.

This plumber settled the matter for the trade council by writing his colleague as follows: "Don't ever use hydrochloric acid. It eats away the bloody tubes and everything!" (Skaarup, here reproduced from a lecture).

Mountains, seas, and hell!

When translating books of non-fiction from one country to another, one runs into far greater problems. When, like the author of this article, one has lived during one's entire childhood in the island of Amager where the highest natural point is very few metres above sea level (that is where Copenhagen Airport is now situated), it is hard to grasp the more profound meaning of the problems faced by the principals in non-fictional books taking place primarily at Himalaya level. At any rate, it was hard for us 8–9-year-olds to understand these subjects.

Yes, even the possibilities of Norwegian and Swedish children of understanding heights are, I regret to admit, larger than those of the Danish children.

In his fairy-tale "Elf-Hill" (Andersen in Erik Dal, 1975), Hans Christian Andersen has the old Norwegian Mountain Chief explain the matter – see illustration above.

*) A Dane!

However, naturally, Norwegians and Danes understand each others' language. It is much worse when it comes to the dialects. Mutually, we accuse each others' dialects of being expressions of "a sore throat" or a bad illness of the voice.

Having no mountains here in Denmark we must find consolation in the fact that the sea is something with which we all become familiar at an early age. Descriptions of the sea cause us no trouble whatsoever here in the Northern countries. We know which concepts are hiding behind vocables like "sea", "sound", and "strait", etc. But how do you explain to a Swiss what the Skagerrak looks like? – what it is? – and what a north-westerly gale, wet with snow and ice, over the Skagerrak really means when you are out in an open boat off the coast?

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During the course of time, snow and ice have caused many problems – also prior to the use of oil and to conflicts in the Middle East. However, those problems of cold with which Hans Egede, the Norwegian-Danish missionary, was confronted when he arrived in Greenland in the 1720s and began to missionize among the Eskimos, were quite exceptional:

The Eskimos *were delighted* when he described the fire and heat of hell (Langer (ed.), 1983). Spontaneously they had a different understanding of essential parts of his missionary message than his audience would have had, if they had been born in Calcutta. – It was difficult for the Eskimos to understand what Hans Egede was *threatening* them with: If they did a whole lot of lovely, forbidden things, he *threatened* that they would land in the best place they could imagine!

What children and adults understand

It is bad enough with Eskimos and hell – and worse still with plumbers and hydrochloric acid. But worst of all is the matter of children and literature. The conceptual world of children is – for better or worse – different from that of the adults.

There are, partly, concepts based on knowledge with which the adult is familiar, but which children have but little chance to handle, and, partly, there are concepts determined by developmental levels which children cannot grasp.

So, when a book for adults, as e.g. one of the many Robinson Crusoe's, moved gradually downwards in age, it ended up being also *conceptually different* – not necessarily thinner; when the latter happened as well, this was probably mainly due to the moralizing which was inserted.

Well-intentioned authors like Campe wanted to make a courageous effort to save the part of the world under the age of majority – by means of a few hundred printed pages. But when one has to save the world in such a limited space, there are some things one must leave out of account – for instance the most honest (or just the best possible) translation of a text. Our contemporary missionaries, recruited from various health freaks, intransigent political or ultra religious movements, cause us similar problems today (Stybe, 1974).

Incidentally, with the rapidly expanding high technological knowledge an entirely new type of conceptual difference has emerged between children and adults. The youngest and the young handle the technology with which they have grown up in a quite relaxed way, while their parents stubbornly keep calling it "the *new* technology".

It serves the adults right!

Neither do the children and the young hide the fact that they are the ones who have the upper hand, as far as that part of the concepts of the generation gap is concerned. More than one translator consults her or his children – in a subdued manner – when the technology enters rudely into the works of fiction, translated as e.g. Kidder, 1982, or Kirkeby, 1985. *What else could the adult translator do?*

These years the world is changing, and the parents are left helpless while the young manage the computers in the daily life with the same easy style with which Ivanhoe managed his horses in the tournament matches.

The only consolation for the adults is that in twenty years the young will be left with

computers long scrapped, while *their* children will be evaluating programmed gene manipulation and adjusting the laser-controlled micro robots built into their wrist watches.

It serves our children right that by that time as adults they will have to translate 'Aarhus stories' (the Danish equivalent to "the stories about the wise men of Gotham") containing that sort of points! And there will still be much material to be translated. As it says in the Ecclesiates which is about 2300 years old, "There is no limit to the number of books written" (12, 12).

Until 1914 there was in the Imperial Turkish Museum in Constantinople a stone with an inscription written abt. the year 4000 B.C. It said on the stone: "The world is degenerating recently. There are indications that the Earth will soon come to an end. Children no longer obey their parents. The end of the world is drawing near – everybody wants to write books!" (Andersen, n. d.)

It was acceptable at that time – and it is still tolerable.

That we shall have to translate all those books is a far worse matter!

In 1970 the following was said in a very far-sighted book: "Among high school pupils there is now a growing interest in computer science" – and the machinery assembly of the new times loomed up in all its might.

And when a vocable is simply missing

English is a great, rich, and varied language – just think of a linguistic cocktail of words about English Hooligans, words from Winnie-the-Pooh and King Lear. However, in the translation of children's literature *from* Danish it is often a real problem that the English language lacks a vocable! There is the word *fiction* which, of course, means *fiction*! Under this designation a lot of books could be gathered, and this is actually done at libraries, publishing houses, bookfairs, in bookshops, schools, homes, etc.

Then there is *non-fiction* – which stands for everything else.

However, in Danish (and in many other languages, e.g. Thai) there is a third designation, namely the "non-fiction" the presentation of which is mainly sustained by "fiction-elements": the well-told non-fiction which has fictional overtones, but *is* non-fictional – and absolutely correct. What I am thinking of is the New Journalism, dramatized documentary, the so-called dramadoc, etc. – in this connection applied to children's books. You have historical fiction, but not necessarily found in history only – to a very high degree also in biology, geology, etc. It is well-known to all people dealing with books. However, in the Danish – or for that matter the Thai – version it is not known everywhere.

What do we do in the international cooperation concerning children's books, now when the children's book *faction* has become an independent genre with books of its own – and is even developing its own genre rules, etc.?

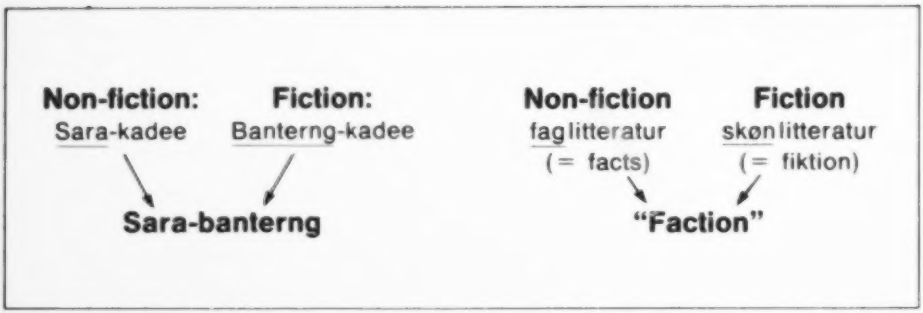
The relationship with New Journalism, etc. could be pointed out. The contents of the children's book faction could be described. That it is a hybrid between facts and fiction appears already from the word itself. Just look at page 17. However, one could not participate in a bookfair – which is planned and thought in English – trying to sell something which is not inside the acceptable English conceptual apparatus of a respectable Englishman. Undeniably, the vocable *faction* means something altogether different in English, and an Englishman could not spontaneously convey to it the meaning of the Danish concept of faction.

The vocable is a problem. Perhaps not only the vocable? Because as faction is certainly not a new genre, it is suggestive that it grew strong – *and different* – when in the Northern countries we *had to* reach beyond those readers whom the literature used to reach – viz. the most well-established readers, largely readers from the uppermost social classes and the ascending exceptions – cf. the paragraph "A very tangible problem" on page 34.

And the fact that it was *necessary* to reach out to far broader circles than before *first* became a reality in Denmark, and *first* among the children. To a considerable degree, it is the "children's book faction" that makes those of the Danish boys of 10–11, who are not very often spontaneously interested in reading fiction, read out of interest.

It is also faction that makes quite a few of the young people who find that they do not get much out of fiction remain readers – also those of them to whom non-fiction is conceptually too difficult, according to experiences from the development of a new type of tests, the so-called "reading testing texts", developed and tested by The Danish National Institute for Educational Research, 1985–87.

During a conversation, Bob Jerrolds, the reading researcher, pointed out that "it is easier to coin a new word than a new idea" – at that time we were talking about reading in general, but it is true in any circumstances.



In phonetic Thai, fiction could be called [banterng-kadee] and non-fiction [sara-kadee]. In Danish, non-fiction is called faglitteratur, facts, and fiction is called skønlitteratur, fiktion. The vocable faction *is created in the same way as in Thai: In order to find a vocable covering new journalism, drama-doc, faction, semi-documentarism, etc., the word [sara-banterng] was constructed!*

And faction *is* just a new (Danish) word – not a new notion. But "faction" also stands for a conceptual reality *which has grown strong* in Denmark, above all among the books which the Danish children read *themselves – because they want to do so.*

This might be observed within larger language areas which do not particularly distinguish themselves by functional readers only? In fact, part of them are not readers at all. Whether you believe in "A Nation at Risk" (1983) or not – I do not believe in it, neither 100%, nor 70% – there are "functional" illiterates and "real" illiterates in some countries – also in the world which is English-speaking and hardly English-reading (Anderson et al, 1985).

No doubt, it would be worth while for the society and for our understanding of the language and concepts of the children (as well as for that part of the world which is still young) to really observe the children and young of today, instead of thinking that they are just ourselves with 30 years' delay. They most certainly are not!

It is true that children are like their parents – in spite of all our efforts to teach them good manners. But there is a difference. A difference of 30 years.

Today children in Denmark – seen as a group – read *better* than we, the adults, did; they also read *more* than we did. (Jansen & Glaesel, 1977; Elbro et al, 1981; Jansen & Kreiner, 1986). This is a regrettable fact. We know that when *we* were children we really learned something – etc.!

– and when the concepts do not (are not allowed to) exist in another language?

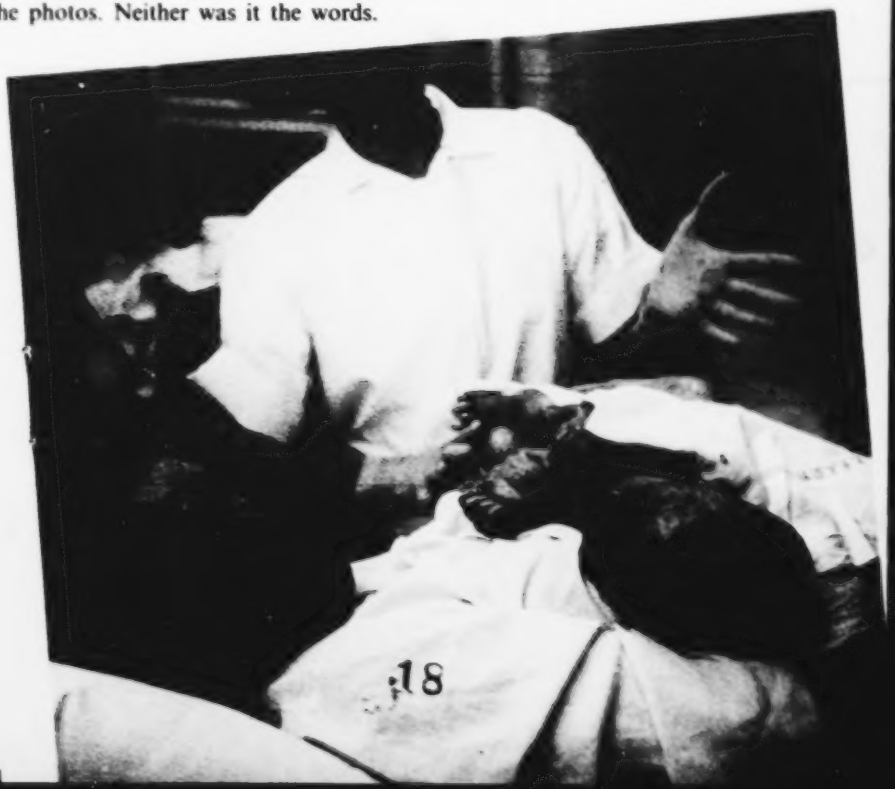
One day I was looking dejectedly at a book of faction meant for the 8–9-year-old Danish children for their leisure reading. The book was about the child as a fetus, about the child from conception to birth (Mirdal, 1984). In the English- and the French-

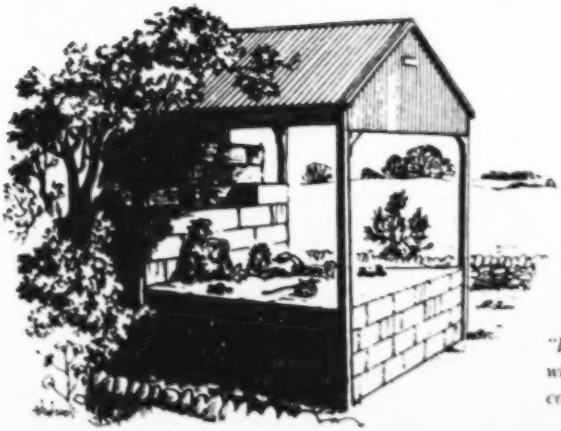
speaking world where people have greater ambitions on behalf of their children than we do in Scandinavia, people would have said that this book was meant for the 5–7-year-olds; in those countries the 8–9-year-olds would probably have been able to read it themselves.

The problem was that it was *impossible* to translate the book for English children – at least according to the English publishers. No Danes understood the reason why this was the case – the Danish version being extremely factual. It said nothing about the conception itself which could have offended Queen Victoria. The other books in the series in question were quite acceptable to the publishers, but this one – – –. The only thing I could think of as a possible reason for the rejection was a suggestion of 'unwashedness' about the head of the newborn baby.

However, the subject was not the problem, the Englishmen explained to us. Much less the photos. Neither was it the words. What then was the problem? – It proved to be the concepts. We were told that the concepts behind the words and photos of the book could not be used in English (at least not for English children). On the other hand, perhaps the English publishers were hiding behind a lot of words. If not, one wonders *how* English babies are brought into the world; *that* they are, we all know. However, there were obviously concepts and conventions rendering a translation of the book impossible.

Translating this book for the heirs of Queen Victoria proved to be as hopeless as selling a book about "patience" to the Americans. The salesman, who would try to do so, would have forgotten an important feature of the American morning prayer: "Dear God! Please give me patience. And please do it now!"





"I remember the days when haystacks were comfortable."

Queen Victoria, American attitudes, etc. are conceptual realities which form part of the English language and thus also of the concepts which stand for something altogether different from what one would expect.

There are differences from country to country which we do not see, until we have burnt our fingers. Generally, the concepts are what we burn our fingers on. The words and sentences of the language can be learned, but one has to grow up with the concepts. This is also the case between the languages of countries close to each other.

The new world of the children

Naturally, the conceptual world of the children changes – these years at a rate which is beyond us. Today the conceptual world of the children is not the same as it was a generation ago – at least this is the case here in Scandinavia. And I wonder, if not even the tradition-bound English who are still watching for vikings at Dover, as well as some of the Swiss who are considering to give even women the vote, would admit that this is also the case in their countries?

One day in the kindergarten the 5-year-old had a sequence from a good old story read aloud to him. The story was about this nice old granddad doddering at the edge of the grave in clogs and with a lit pipe in his mouth.

The child commented that he too had a granddad but he was away on a computer course, and he certainly did not smoke, because he did not want to get lung cancer. – In the new society the pieces of information are received very quickly! They also reach far out into the society. They hit the aware children, and indeed also the children who are almost falling asleep in front of some screen. Children know a lot today – at any event they know much more than we expect, and in many cases they know much more than we knew, when we were their age.

We tend to forget this.

And we still write books for children in which there are idyllic haystacks and welcoming farmhouses, with a thin line of smoke from the chimney, while the sun goes down behind the distant green hills. Furthermore, the appletrees are in blossom, and people walk hand in hand below them, while they scratch the cows' foreheads and dance around the Maypole.

There are not even two generations between this past and the computer-controlled farm of modern times: agricultural analyses inform the farmer where to use fertilizer and how much and with what chemicals. Data from these analyses are put into a program together with market prices, E.E.C. systems of subsidies and the fluctuations of the U.S. dollar. The farmer then determines what and where to sow, and when to harvest. Incidentally, rates of increase for meat and milk have been carefully calculated for the cows – which stopped having names many years ago. And out in the fields where the hay used to lie in rolls it is now waiting to be taken to the factory and made into fuel or to be used in the building industry.

Still, we keep writing children's books in which the farms are at least 30 years old; and the translator has to fight with the concepts of these books, because the books are read in a world in which the concepts are indisputably different. This creates problems even to the most knowledgeable and conscientious translator.

One of these problems can be described very briefly:

In Denmark today it is impossible to publish a book of fiction pretending to be a book of non-fiction and meant for children above 7–8, if the animals are equipped with human emotions. Blackbirds, dogs, cats, horses, earthworms (or whatever animal the writers might have taken a fancy to) do not have an emotional life – anyway not according to Danish, Norwegian, or Icelandic traditions; this is hardly due to the fact that these languages are West Germanic. Perhaps the reason is that these are old agricultural and fishing societies? Or maybe it has something to do with the fact that the instruction in biology has really made itself felt. Children of today simply *know* about animals.

Anyway, it is impossible in Denmark to publish a book meant for the leisure reading of the children, if this book is about "the blackbird grieving over its lost egg", "the cat thinking of her poor old sick mother whom she hadn't seen for many weeks". Of course, this means a hurdle to us translators, because it means that if we translate – verbally and literally – many of the good children's books which are above the fairy-tale age and which have non-fictional elements – these books are rejected very firmly by the children.

This is one of the problems arising when children are firstly taught to read and secondly to use the books according to their own conditions. We have given the children vitamins, minerals, sensible food habits, etc. – and they have outgrown us. We have taught them to read *themselves* and through our school and children's libraries given them free access to books which they both read and comprehend. The result is, a.o. – a generation gap leaving us powerless.

In order to be able to maintain a tradition of translation from English, German, and French (we are happy with the Northern tradition, but cannot live on that alone) we have – during the latest generation or two – developed a routine in de-mythologizing the books so that they are true to the origin without unintentionally having a comic effect on the Danish children for whom they are (not?) intended.

"The world is still a book, and he who stays at home, still reads only one page," as it is said. But there are many adults who stay at home in their own world of yesterday and forget to move into the world of today and into the concepts of the next generation – even if these adults both write and translate for the world of to-morrow.

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Danish children create special problems – they read!

As mentioned, translating for Danish children creates problems – also because they are so little orthodox. They have read quite a lot – they not only *are able to* read. *They actually do so!* In the course of 180 years we have (finally) succeeded in teaching the children to read themselves and to use the books. Now we see the terrifying result:

With an increasing knowledge comes an increasing scepticism towards the problems and postulates of the adult world.

As in other countries, the Danish children and young people of the 1980s have placed their parents of the 1960s – not exactly on a pedestal, but on the shelf where parents have always been placed – in a place where the dust is falling. Today this shelf has even been placed in a remote room where it does no harm, a.o. because the young (and actually also the children) have, by reading, acquired independence from the adults to an extent which we have never known before.

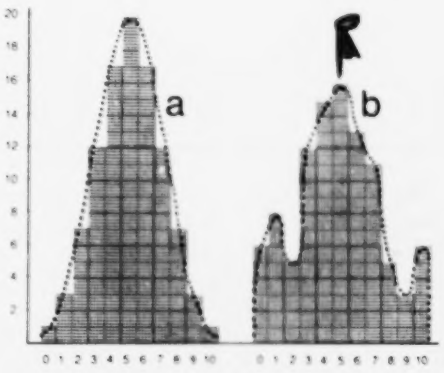
In a society it *always* creates problems, when a group becomes knowledgeable – because then it also becomes very much more independent of its surrounding world than before.

This is what the Danish children have become.

"But isn't this bound to create disciplinary problems in Denmark?" we are asked by foreigners. It is. And it does – both among children, young, and middle-aged.

Hopefully disciplinary problems will soon emerge also among the elderly. At least, what they put up with is not reasonable! While being busy solving the problems in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Sweden, Nicaragua, Libya, Chile, etc. (please continue the list according to your own political affiliation), "we have carefully closed our eyes to the strongest and most evil discrimination in this country – the age discrimination. It is vicious – and it is not even talked about." (Jansen, 1984). But this is another story – as also other people than Kipling have put it.

Still, Danish children do not quite create the same problems as e.g. American children, not even as the Swedish children. The problems created by the Danish children are definitely smaller, in many ways also more peaceful. On the other hand, the (relatively small) problems they do create are more or



In drawing a *the squared area shows the distribution of pupils classified according to reading ability after a reading test in grade 3, autumn 1966; 10 indicates the best group.*

In drawing b *the squared area shows the distribution of pupils classified according to reading ability after the same reading test in the same grade in 1972 and 1973.*

The dotted lines show how the "squeeze" tendency has influenced the original distribution.

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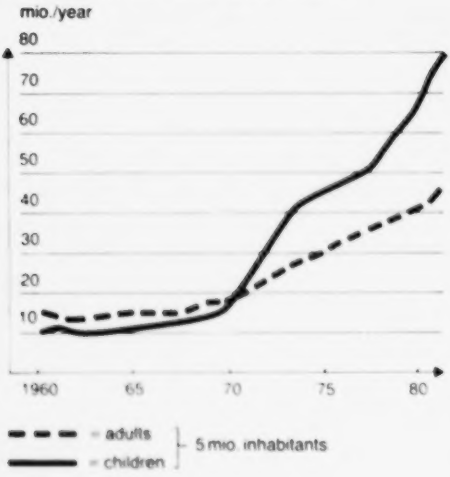
A changed consumption of library books



The figure shows the book lending in million lendings per year from public libraries, described via lendings to adults and children, respectively.

A fall in lendings to children after 1980 might be expected in connection with the dropping in numbers of children at the reading age, but no fall has been confirmed. The increase in lendings to adults from the same year must be seen in relation to the fact that the children in increasing numbers continue as readers into their youth and that the young ones continue reading as adults.

Age grouping	So many percent of the age groups are borrowers	
	1968	1979
0-6 years	36%	37%
7-11 years	70%	95%
12-15 years	75%	98%
Adults	40%	48%

less *constant*. The children cannot and will not be treated as minors – primarily because they are more independent than children used to be, and they are more independent than the children in many other countries. They have not, like the American children, brought up their parents well; that is why we notice it in this country.

When Danish children are together with adults they are friendly and patronizing. Not only have they watched adults on the TV – and in the family! They have also *read* about how to deal with adults; there are books written about that, of course.

Perhaps exactly the fact that Danish children belong to the children in the world who read most (according to Dalby et al, 1983) is what gives us, the adult Danes, constant problems within many fields.

Among other things, reading aloud to the children has become a difficult matter. – One of the reasons for this is that they have had so much material read aloud to them – they know the books themselves (Kühl & Munk, 1979).

"They are so damned independent and well read," their grandparents say – at least, I do. Many years ago one could sit down together with one of one's many grandchildren, open a picturebook, read aloud, and expect an attentive listening. Nowadays one has only one grandchild; after all we live in the country where the aged are not dead, and where the children are not born (Kreiner & Jansen, 1985). And thus you read to this only child: "Here we have a nice cat" – and you are told immediately that the cat is ugly!

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You try arguing: "But don't you see, it *is* a nice, grey pussycat?", – whereupon the child tells you that the cat has black stripes. Quickly you say that it is *mainly* grey; anyway, it only has a few black stripes.

Now you are told that the cat also has a red collar, and the kid asks you, if you don't have a book about dogs, because he does not like cats: "They scratch!".

"They do *not*! Cats are nice," you argue.

The kid does not answer, but puts a triumphant finger on a long scratch on your arm – where the kid's damned cat scratched you yesterday.

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Miss Caroline began the day by reading us a story about cats. The cats had long conversations with one another, they wore cunning little clothes and lived in a warm house beneath a kitchen stove. By the time Mrs Cat called the drug-store for an order of chocolate malted mice the class was wriggling like a bucketful of catawba worms. Miss Caroline seemed unaware that the ragged, denim-shirted and floursack-skirted first grade, most of whom had chopped cotton and fed hogs from the time they were able to walk, were immune to imaginative literature. Miss Caroline came to the end of the story and said, '*Oh*, my, wasn't that nice?'

Harper Lee: »To Kill a Mockingbird«

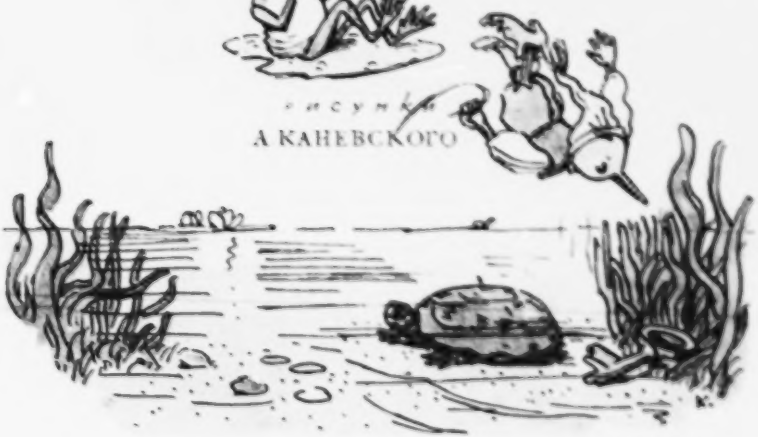
The distinction is not between books with animals – with or without scarves, hats, and boots: The fairy-tale and its animals give so much and belong to the childhood – and to the adult years, for that matter. Neither is the distinction between fantasy and imagination on one hand and reality on the other. Fantasy is always a reality, and reality is fantastic.

It is a matter of respect for the reader and for what the reader intends *with his/her reading.*

And thus, let page 24–26 be a tribute to the beings who – with or without clothes – tell us about ourselves – Doré's cat, Shepard's stupid Mr. Toad, Ungerer's Crictor, Disney's pigs and Pinocchio, here in a Russian version by Tolstoy, p. 26.

А. ТОЛСТОЙ

Золотой ключик
или приключения Буратино



Рисунки
А. КАНЕВСКОГО

Москва «ДЕТСКАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА» 1977

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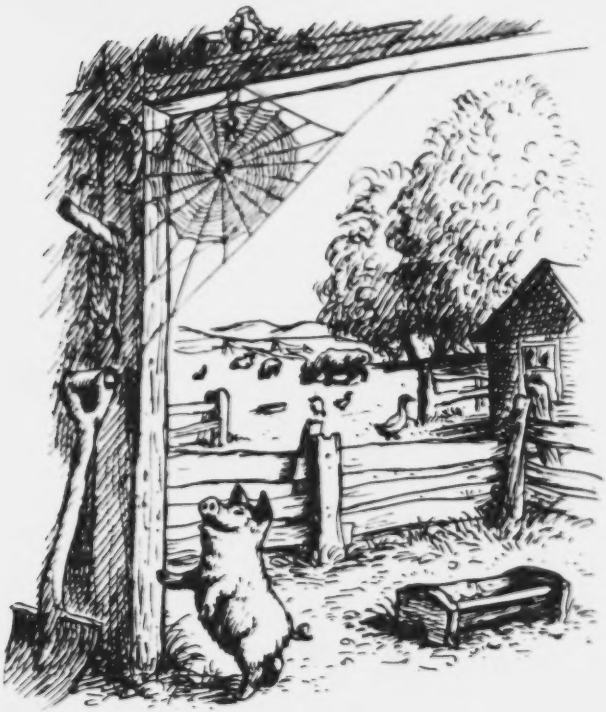
However, reading aloud to a Danish child from a book like "Alice in Wonderland" is much more difficult. Quite soon the child asks what the book ends with, turning to the last page to check it – and then the child suggests that you go and get another book.

They lack veneration, the Danish children.

Books like the Swedish one called "Stella and Stine" (Ramstedt, 1979) about girls and horses are really problematic. Before accepting to translate and publish it in one of our series, I read it aloud to a few children who knew a lot about horses. They soon judged it to be much too babyish. The subject matter was all right, but the book was not credible, they said.



The reading aloud of "Charlotte's Web" by E. B. White was much more successful, even if this book was certainly not credible either! On the other hand, it did not pretend to be. Moreover, this book has quality and a sense of humour which we and our children can accept.

When I quoted the criticism of my young audience in order to convince the writer of "Stella and Stine" that we would have to correct its style of childishness, the writer took offence. I had to explain that Danish children were abominably matter-of-fact when it came to books of non-fiction – and fiction, for that matter. But this only made the matter worse! – "Why should they be different from and worse than the Swedish children?". After all, we are neighbouring countries, Sweden and Denmark – and friends, aren't we?

However, it certainly is not negative for the children to be independent. They ask questions – which is good. Still, I am looking forward to the time when the children will have children of their own. That will serve them right!

Also the young of today will become adults; they will have children (less than we had!) – and "they (=our children) will be right". But by that time they are surely not young any more.

That will serve them right, too! By that time they will realize that their parents were often right. But then they will have children who know that *their* parents are mainly wrong. And wrong they will be, if they try

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Later that evening, a lady knocked at the door. "I'm your Aunt Gertrude, Mona," she said. "Don't you recognize me, dear?"

to understand the books of non-fiction for the children of that time.

Incidentally, it will be difficult to translate these books – – –

The impossible books of non-fiction

Already now we know that it is much more difficult to translate non-fiction than fiction.

The children demand that the books of non-fiction (and faction) are correct. They have read much more than the generation before them; naturally they have also watched more TV and video. They know the concepts behind the vocables of the language.

Already at the age of 4–5 the Danish children are prepared to murder all the dressed American, slang-speaking animals which (believe it or not) fool around in the books in increasing numbers – with Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse as acceptable exceptions. And one feels like giving the children a long, sharp knife, wishing them "Good hunting!" Perhaps we could then escape seeing these animals live long enough to be sold on video also in this country. However, this kind of video plague is not a translator's problem. Such videos are so infantile that any translator is superfluous. Even the most simple folktale has a complex plot compared with these intellectually insulting videos.

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When the children are 8, the demands made on the books of non-fiction are greater still:

One day grandma read a sweet, old story – it was at least 20 years old – about "father blackbird who had built a lovely nest for his little family. Now he was sitting there, singing happily to his nice, sweet wife and his five small lovely eggs."

The blue-eyed grandchild with the fair, curly hair explained unsentimentally that a cock-blackbird did not care at all about the eggs. "The cock-blackbird is singing in order to claim his territory – which he does mainly during the breeding time." There was grandma – left with a translated book which she could not even burn, even if she strongly felt like it – because they had electric heating in their low-energy house.

And when on an autumn morning you admire the spider's webs in the grass together with a 5-year-old, pointing out how very clever the spider has become at spinning, the child explains to you patiently that "already several thousand thousand years ago – long before the stone age "(which is not far from the time, when grandma and the parents were young)" – this kind of spiders made the same kind of webs. Actually they cannot stop – and they cannot do anything else either."

Still, Charlotte's Web is accepted. Most likely it is the question of quality again!

It is simply a matter of quality

Astrid Lindgren has said something very precise and very essential about quality: "A children's book is really good, if by reading it you get far out into the wide world – and far, far into you yourself." (Broadcast in the Swedish Radio, 1984). In her excellent fantasy "The Rider in the Black Mantle" Astrid Lindgren goes into this theme. This is quality. And as a translator, one enjoys working with quality.

Then one can always close one's eyes afterwards, keep a stiff upper lip and think of England before starting to translate (*and adapt!*) the dull and always very much alike English schoolbooks with the endless stories about clean, anaemic Romans, about neverending, dreary, intersected roads, about intolerably cheerful chimney sweeps – and all the books also have a couple of photos chosen from the family album of the writer.

It is almost quite as bad as having to translate the – in every way – coloured American books of non-fiction about speaking machines, hectic monsters and provokingly clever and gay children, with sex, colour of skin, height, shoe number, set of teeth, size, etc. carefully balanced according to the proper percentages in the central part of the North American continent.

I am convinced that not even those who construct these books have ever been able to love them, but they have probably come to terms with making a good living on selling them.

During the last twenty years things have become worse, for, as Piet Hein says, "Never has the provincialism been greater – and the imagination more unimaginative! – than in the comic strips where people have come out into the universe by space rockets where they live a cheerful life among the stars and quite naturally see it as their mission to introduce their way of life to the entire Mil-

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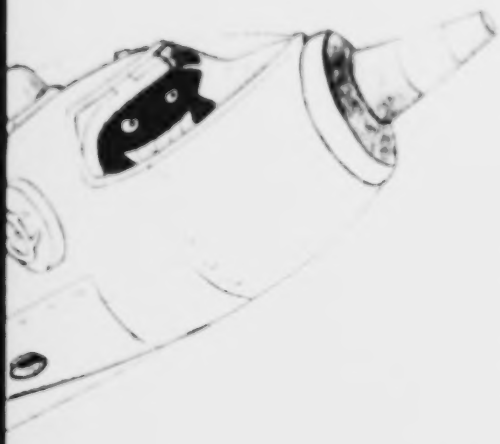
ky Way – and having heroic trouble converting the intelligent, but morally reprehensible 16-legged spiders which live on the innermost planets around the North Star." (Hein, 1963.) The concepts of these books are simply *too* infantile for the age level to which the books appeal. Neither Danish children like to read and at the same time be crammed with concepts which they outgrew already at the age of 4.

At this place one example – or ten – ought to have been inserted. But I do not want to offend my good English colleagues.

Such "books of non-fiction" are the pet aversion of a Danish translator! Rather be with children then, even Danish – in spite of all!



The disabled readers and their books

However, the largest problems of them all emerge if one ventures to try and translate books meant for disabled readers. The disproportion between what these children and young can manage to read and what they can cope with intellectually is very considerable and creates very great problems of translation.

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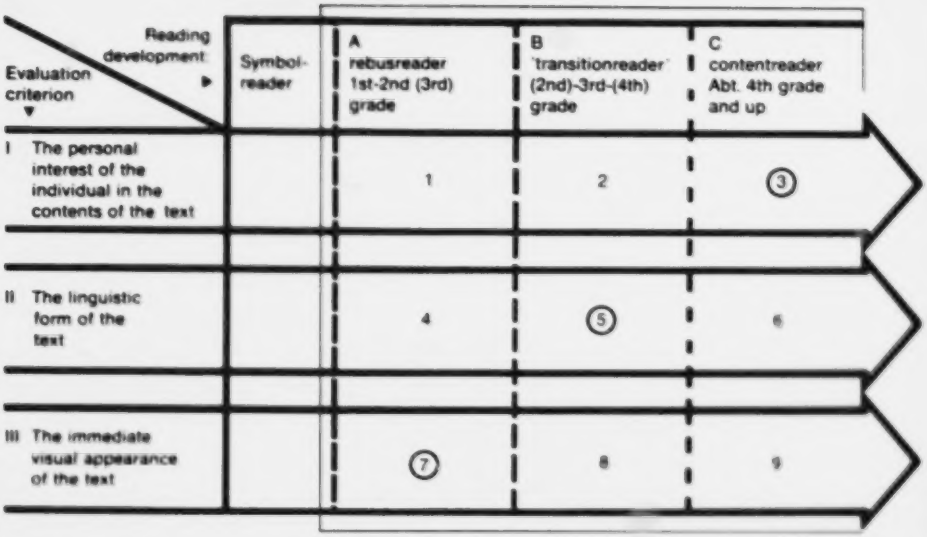

The bad thing is that it looks as if the disproportion is getting still greater – not because the children become poorer readers or function worse than before intellectually; this is not the case. The problem is that exactly the children obtain a bigger vocabulary, a more well-developed conceptual apparatus, etc. – And the reading competence of the disabled readers does not improve correspondingly.

"The visible language of the book"

The aspects forming parts of any book are:

I. the contents
II. the language (and the concepts)
III. the visual appearance
(= the visible language of the book).

In relation to the disabled readers these three factors cannot be evaluated in the same way as in all other instances.

If *the visual appearance of the book* (III) is not optimal, the disabled reader uses practically all her/his energy to *decode* the text and has no possibility of saving energy also to *interpret* what it says.

The result is a very slow reading which demands, as a minimum, a double reading of the whole page, the whole chapter, or the whole book. "I did not pay attention when I read it the first time," is a phrase well-known to every reading teacher who has discussed the contents of a book with a disabled reader, – even if the book is ever so good and interesting, is chosen by the pupil, is provided with an eye-catching cover, etc.

When teaching disabled readers, one becomes aware that much too often we who make books for them, design these books in such a way that they become unnecessarily 'hostile' to the disabled readers. We know what makes a book easy as regards typography, print, paper, etc. – but nevertheless we very seldom live up to this knowledge of ours. This is unreasonable (Ellegaard Frederiksen, 1981; Grandjean, 1986; Dalby et al, 1987).

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The language of the book

However, even an optimal visual appearance does not make the book go down, when the disabled reader starts reading it.

The language of the book (II) must be so literal, so logical as regards lapses of time, so simple and so generally probable as not to create any problems to the reader. It must say almost exactly what the reader expects it to say – and then also say a little new which has to be interesting and preferably also entertaining.

Just imagine that the shelves of the libraries were brimful of exciting and funny books! In "Aladdin", one of the tales in the Arabian Nights, Nureddin, the evil magician, exchanged new lamps for old ones. I should like to go to a bookfair and exchange ten problem books for one funny book – and 50 children's books full of all the unsolved problems of the adults for just one funny and exciting book about children's problems.

In a number of countries a readability formula has been introduced in order to provide against the worst examples of departmental style and high-flown language. Unfortunately, many of these readability formulas are over-simplified to such an extent that they come close to being non-informative and nugatory. In other cases they are so intricate and difficult in practical use that they seem to have more to do with mathematics and statistics than with language. However, in relation to the books written in the most complicated language they have all had a certain rationalizing effect.

As a result of such readability formulas many children's books have become reasonably understandable – which is good. Here in Scandinavia this has meant that even the State messages and letters to the citizens are now often readable (and sometimes partly understandable) by others than professors who are familiar with older languages once spoken along the coasts of the Mediterranean.

It has been very satisfactory having such a readability formula with which to rap writers and jurists over the knuckles!

However, unfortunately, a low lix ("lix" is the most widespread readability formula in Scandinavia and the German-speaking area) is definitely no guarantee for an easy text. A low lix may express a completely illegible telegraphese, data-nonsense or a pidgin-language entirely incomprehensible to everybody but the one who wrote this impossible language – in order to write easy (Jakobsen, 1969; 1971; 1976; 1983).

It is easy
to write difficult
and it is difficult
to write easy

It is very difficult
to write easy
for ordinary readers
about difficult concepts

And it is extremely difficult
to write very easy
for weaker readers
about difficult concepts

Therefore, most people write difficult – especially if they are paid by the line – or have recently graduated from a university and want to demonstrate their own scholarly capacities.

In texts intended for disabled readers (and above all in books with texts so long that this in itself is a complicating factor to the disabled reader) the language has to be so simple that it does not drown the contents.

A highly experienced user of language is able to disregard much linguistic noise without having trouble in extracting information from a text. The disabled reader is unable to cope with even the slightest noise in connection with the language. "The reserve of comprehension" is extremely modest, exactly in the disabled reader. It goes without saying that the concepts should not be blurred by inaccuracies in the language – much less be hidden under a cover of linguistically superfluous vocables.

"In that case, why not let the disabled readers look after themselves?" This is, unfortunately, still the motto for much teaching and for most writers. "After all, today only 10, 15, 18% of one year are disabled readers" – here in Scandinavia. Other countries would state other percentages. And irrespective of what we think of stating percentages for such conditions, there are in many countries greater reading problems than here in the Northern countries. Many have written about this highly interestingly, as e.g. Kozol as early as in 1967 and again in 1985. Many others have written about it in less exciting ways, documenting the problems by means of figures – but nobody denies the problem.

Fortunately, the patronizing attitude towards "the others" is no longer generally seen. Even intellectual authors who write for each other and in order to keep their critics busy are now starting to notice that there are actually beings (even human beings) outside the closed rooms in which they move. And the intellectuals marvel greatly at the different language and the different and at the same time identical concepts of these persons!

But when the translation succeeds after all?

Yes, then the problems have only just started, because in Denmark we have the general problem compared with for instance English, French, and U.S. children's books that the very *use* of these books in this country differs from the general use in many other countries.

The background is that in our educational system it is of very great importance indeed to us that the pupils read *themselves*.

People from other countries visiting us tell us spontaneously that they find that there is not much instruction in reading in our grades 2, 3, and 4 (where the children are 8–11). "The pupils just sit there; they are never examined, etc." This is true in many cases. And it means that most of the books published for these age levels must be able to function *without a teacher!*

The unfavourable element of this instruction is that the pupils are not guided by their teacher, when it comes to the straight and narrow path. The favourable element about it is that the pupils *themselves* get used to reading, hopefully also to comprehending – and that they become independent. In the long run they also become more independent – for the same reason – than many adults seem to approve of.

A very tangible problem

In addition there is another central thing which we in Denmark have to be aware of: There are more than one billion Chinese – in China alone. There are several hundred million people reading English, French, etc. This means that theoretically there is an immense potential market for children's

literature written in e.g. Chinese, English or French – also for the 8–11-year-olds.

There are barely five million people reading Danish; and out of them, one year of children amounts to only barely 60,000 for the time being – in this country we have the world's lowest natural increase. This means that while in England or France or the U.S. (or, for that matter, China, Japan, South America, Spain, Brazil, Portugal, etc.) there will be a sufficient market for a book, if only 4–5% of the children in the language area are potential readers of it, a Danish publisher has to calculate that at least one fourth of the children must be potential readers of a given book in order to make it financially possible to publish it.

This presents a real problem.

All that is not said in the reading research which we translate

Not only the translation of children's books creates problems.

Translation from a world language into a small language spoken only in a rather unknown country is generally a problem. Let me choose an example from my own field of research, the teaching of reading, partly reproduced from Jansen, 1982: We *know* what 'reading' is – at least, when we know the surroundings in which the reading takes place.

And it is easy to read about the reading research from other countries

– at least, if we are able to read the languages in which the results are presented;

– and if we know the background which is seldom described in the reports;

– and if we are familiar with *all the untold things* about traditions, general conditions in the society in question, etc. In other words, the concepts behind the words, all the unspoken things – not only what is on the lines and between the lines, but what is behind the lines (Schmidt, 1984).

As Noel Coward put it: 'The English and the Americans have so much in common – not the language, of course, but ...' (Jansen, 1985). That is the fact of the matter. And

what about the countries and language areas which have much less in common?

Within a small language area like the Danish one we have to translate research from other countries; partly we must translate direct into Danish, partly more or less draw conclusions from the results reached in other countries.

It is good that we have to do so, because it keeps us awake.

It is hopeless that we have to do so, because we so easily forget about the total and overall surroundings of 'reading' at a given place which are contributory to determining what reading actually is.

When we find that we have done a good job in translating a research article from another language, could it be because it lies at such an abstract level that it has only a slight connection with the everyday life?

At any rate, one gets this notion when looking at the textbooks and articles which are translated. Indeed, it is not the most concrete material which is translated. The more abstract the level at which we work with our translations, the better the chance that our attempt will be "successful".

When it comes to the research which is important to the school in its daily work, we must not forget that both the child, the family, and the teacher have very different positions and backgrounds in the different countries.

A few concrete examples:

The words '**inner-city school**' mean one thing in one country and practically the opposite in another country. But these words are often translated roughly.

When speaking of '**ghettos**' in the U.S. and the Northern countries, it would be highly unreliable to parallel the 'ghettos' of those places. I remember a visit from an American colleague who visited a Danish 'ghetto' with me. I showed it to him, and he thought that we were on our way to it. And he was a little offended that *that* was our ghetto; I think he left Copenhagen confident that I had not shown him the real ghetto; however, *we do have ghettos with very serious problems* – also in Copenhagen.

I could also mention the Englishman discussing, at a conference in Leeds, the subject of '**class barriers**' with a Norwegian. Little by little the two of them discovered that actually they were not talking about the same thing. They would not have found this out if they had *read* about 'class barriers'.

Yet another example, which does not prove anything either, is the following:

Many years ago we in Denmark had a call from an American who wanted to carry out a large-scale comparison of the conditions of life and the reading competence in different countries. In order to 'compare something alike' he had chosen to let the survey take place in **capitals**; had we been nasty, we could have suggested Washington, Nuuk (Godthaab in Greenland), Stockholm, and Tehran.

But at least he had prepared himself: in the study only those classes should be included in which, among other ideas, the *parents of all children were unskilled*. It was *very* difficult for us to find enough of such classes in Copenhagen. Besides, there is a difference between unskilled labour in Oslo and Monrovia. Moreover, it had to be **numerically large classes**; and that was easy! Now we have 16–20 pupils in the classes, but at that time there were up to 27 or 28 in many classes, and we did find some large classes. However, when he came to Copenhagen in the middle of the study, while it was actually in action, he rejected our classes on the ground that his 'large classes' started from above and ended at 35 pupils.

However, many comparisons have been

made on the basis of that study – and they are described in the educational literature. It ought to have ended up at the dumping ground or in the collection of misunderstood comparative education.

My personal conclusion is *not* – (far from it) – that all research and translation at an international level should be stopped, and that we should only think rationally.

That would leave us with a provincial and conceptually meagre literature and with a research far too narrow. There is a demand for competent comparative education. This means that in our capacity of researchers we do not only have to master our own languages and a great deal of statistics, but we also have to be attentive to the slight differences in the concepts of the languages.

Surely we must proceed internationally – and in more languages

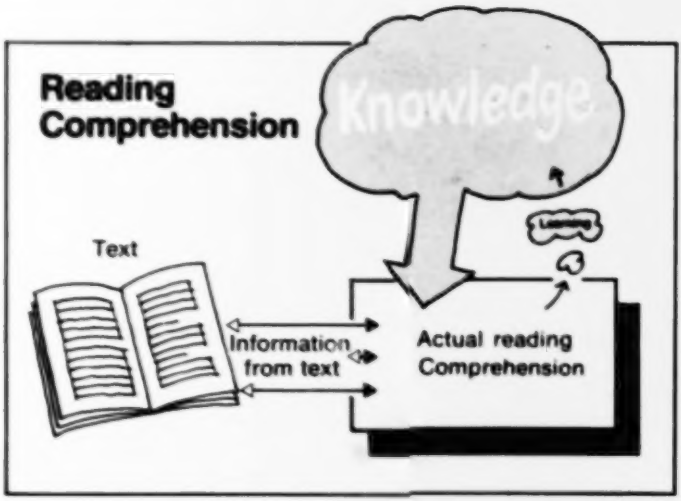
The linguistic width of the research also provides a conceptual width.

It is hard learning language No. 2 and language No. 3. But they provide us with width in our research and in the concepts and make us see the variations in many conditions – also in the books which we translate.

Add to this that everyone working with books for children faces a strongly increasing problem: Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber saw it early (1981); Naisbitt has mentioned it (1983); Toffler said it first – and again and again (1972; 1981; 1985): In an information society more and more people must know more and more. Today children, young, and adults must read more and more – and at the same time more and more variedly.

We live in an information society making a living by using knowledge. Not only reading, but reading comprehension is vital to the individual. All the time we carry part of this comprehension along with us. We read with our past, our knowledge – etc. The arrows in the figure point in *two* directions!

One does not work passively with reading matter.



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321. VIN-ROSE, ROSA RUBIGINOSA L.

Reading is an active process. The logo of the Danish National Association of Reading Teachers might – very much to the point – be mentioned in this connection:

Reading – both knowledge and experience.

Only, it should not be forgotten that neither knowledge, nor experience is *given* to you. Both have to be developed, worked at – for the whole of one's life!

To the many people working with books for children it has become necessary to aim as strongly as possible at giving children as many experiences and as much knowledge as possible – also via the books.

Today it is a question of knowledge to be disseminated to everyone in the society – also knowledge about conditions which used to be the private knowledge of the experts.

The polyhistory is dead, but these years expectations are springing up that in a democracy taking itself seriously largely everyone must be able to comprehend very large parts of what is issued in print – both on paper and screens – and intended for everyone. The translation of books for children is also a question of conveying knowledge, experiences – and attitudes, as shown in the beautiful Swedish book called "Nordens Flora" – "A rose is a rose is a rose" (as Gertrude Stein said). This is true. There are roses – and details – and there is a whole. The whole is the rose.

And translation for children is not least a matter of providing still more children with still more possibilities of acquiring knowledge on their own, while we keep in mind that the decisive thing is the whole of which the translation forms a part – both the whole of the book and the whole which forms the world of the children.

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AN ACCOUNT OF Denmark, AS It was in the Year 1692.

Pauci prudentiâ, honesta ab deterioribus, utilia ab noxiis discernunt; plures aliorum eventis docentur. Tacit. lib. 4° Ann.

Vincit amor patriæ—— Virg.

LONDON:
Printed in the Year 1694.

Epilogue

Reading in Denmark – a historical perspective

Perhaps it is not only a contemporary phenomenon which lies behind the fact that in this country largely everyone is able to read?

In 1692 the Englishman Robert Molesworth wrote "An Account of Denmark as it was in the Year 1692". There is no doubt that this is one of the most well-known books ever writen about Denmark – if not *the* most well-known book.

In 1692 Molesworth left his post as a diplomat in Copenhagen – and wrote not only an often quoted book, but at the same time maybe the most negative book altogether which could be written about the country he was leaving.

However, Denmark *was* dirty, and it *was* a country where the conduct of the absolute monarch could only make a liberal Englishman revolt. Denmark *was* an old-fashioned and stagnant peasant country. It was an awful country. No doubt about it.

"There is but one university, in Copenhagen, and that is of a poor quality in every respect," Molesworth wrote in one of his few friendly comments. "Neither building nor means can compare with the worst of our colleges."

Perhaps the following was meant to be positive:

"In conclusion, let me say that I have never known a country where the disposition of the people is to such an extent of a uniform calibre and height as it is here. You meet nobody with special gifts or qualifications, nobody who distinguish themselves by exceptional studies or trades, no enthusiasts, no madmen, no fools, no fantasts. They are all more or less alike. Everybody keeps to the beaten track of mediocrity which is, in this country, neither the best nor the poorest, without turning left or right."

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The only really positive comment Molesworth put forward was this addition: "However, I want to add the one remark that generally the ordinary people are able to read and write".

They have read ever since, and now they read from the age of 8–9. Rarely earlier.

But they keep reading.

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Literature

– applied in the booklet

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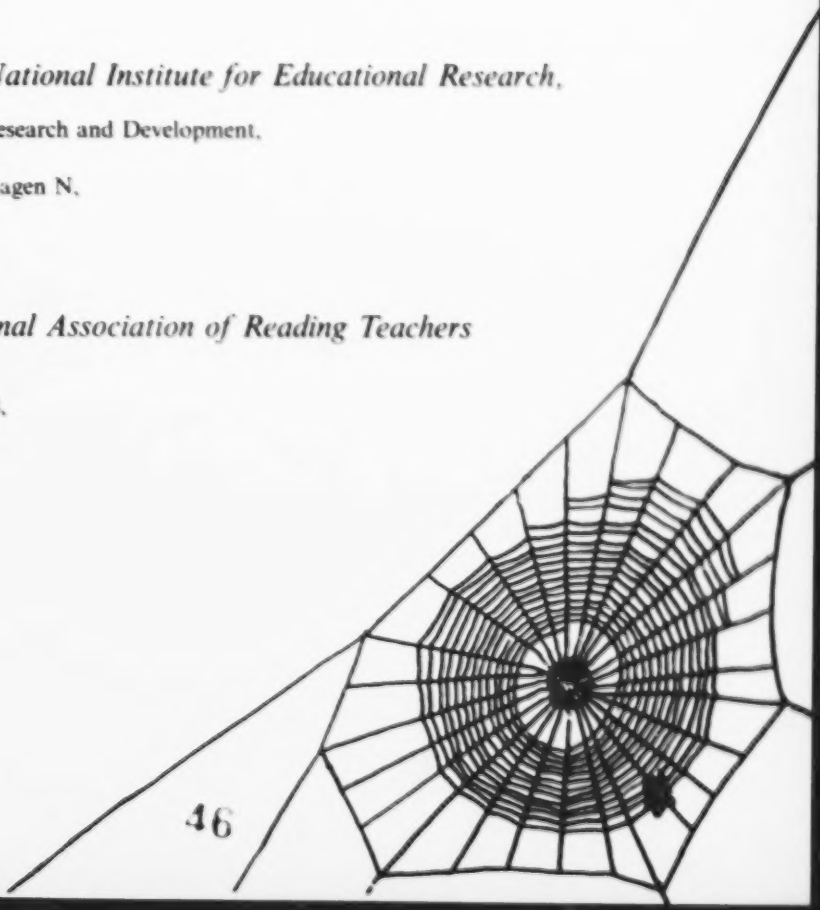

EUROPE

»So it is, Adso. And there are even richer treasuries. Some time ago, in the cathedral of Cologne, I saw the skull of John the Baptist at the age of twelve.«

»Really?« I exclaimed, amazed. Then, seized by doubt, I added, »But the Baptist was executed at a more advanced age!«

»The other skull must be in another treasury,« William said.